

# Bonhoeffer: A Witness to Christ

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On February 4 of this year, the Christian world commemorated the 70th anniversary of the birth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran minister-theologian hanged by the Gestapo in the waning days of World War II. Bonhoeffer was only thirty-nine years old at his death; his influence on the Church in Germany seemingly at an end. And, yet, today a generation and a half later, Christians are still inspired and challenged to a more genuine faith by his letters from prison, and by his *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together*, and other writings. In many ways Bonhoeffer has been more influential after his martyrdom than he ever was during his teaching and preaching career in the years prior to his participation in the conspiracy against Hitler.

## *Bonhoeffer the Student*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a brilliant student, a competent musician and a successful athlete in track and tennis. At the surprising age of twenty-one he had already completed his doctoral dissertation which, when published under the title, *Sanctorum Communio*, would be praised by Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* as a 'theological miracle'. Indeed, the full title of the work, *A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, reflects the core of his lifelong orientation: to discover the concrete, communal locus of the Christian life. Bonhoeffer defined the Church as a reality in which 'Christ exists as community'. In this thesis he also attempted to move between two ideas: the Church as a human society and the Church as the Kingdom of God. The Church is neither an ideal society nor a gathering of the gifted. It is a present reality, the result of God's action in history and as much a communion of sinners as a communion of saints touched by the saving acts of Christ.

After a lengthy trip to Rome and a year spent as minister to a German-speaking parish in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer prepared his *Habilitationschrift*, *Act and Being*, the second dissertation required to secure a professional appointment in German universities. Much of this second thesis, published in 1931, continues the insight of *Sanctorum Communio* that the proper understanding of revelation needs a certain concretion within the Church. Solely from within the revelational experience can a person judge himself to have been brought by God into an interpersonal relationship with Christ. In this work, he clashes with Karl Barth, a theologian whom he would come to admire the most in the years of the Nazi crisis. According to Bon-

hoeffer, Barth had stressed too much God's eternal remoteness. God has, on the contrary, 'freely bound himself to historical man, having placed himself at man's disposal. . . . God is "haveable", graspable in his Word within the Church'.

Before undertaking his teaching post at Berlin University, Bonhoeffer accepted a Sloane fellowship to spend a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The experiences of this sabbatical year were to affect profoundly his entire theological outlook, despite what he, at the time, detected to be an absence of theological substance at Union. What Bonhoeffer did find at this American seminary, on the other hand, was a deep concern for the 'Social Gospel', a desire to bring Christianity into daily contact with the everyday community. Bethge appropriately calls this period of Bonhoeffer's life a conversion in which Bonhoeffer the theologian became a Christian. Looking back on this period of his past, Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend: 'For all my abandonment, I was quite pleased with myself. Then the Bible, and in particular, the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from that. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly, and so have other people about me. It was a great liberation. It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the Church'.

#### *The Teacher and Ecumenist*

On his return to Germany Bonhoeffer was caught up in the political and ecclesiastical turmoil then raging as Hitler was making his strongest grab for power. This, together with his teaching, pastoral ministry and ecumenical activity, catalyzed Bonhoeffer's conviction that effective work in the Church demanded his total commitment to renewal in the Church and to challenging it to relevance even at the risk of its suppression by the civil authorities.

In this connection, Bonhoeffer's experience as student chaplain of the Technical University at Charlottenburg and as catechist for a confirmation class in the Zion parish in Berlin gave him a lasting insight into the practical difficulties of preaching the Word to people hardly conditioned by their social environment for anything smacking of religion. The boys he was preparing for confirmation were living in one of the poorer sections of Berlin and had already been exposed to the drums of Hitler's Youth Movement. Bonhoeffer's method with them was a free departure from the catechism then in vogue. As he disclosed in a letter to a Swiss friend: 'It is something new to them to be given something other than the catechism. I have developed all my instructions on the idea of the community, and these young men, who are always listening to party political speeches, know quite well what I'm getting at. . . . And again and again we have found our way from faith in the communion of saints to the forgiveness of sins'. While teaching the Christian message beyond the conventional limits of the catechism to these religiously deprived boys, Bonhoeffer felt the necessity of interpreting the Word in terms they could understand. He also

recognised the need for a more active association in their difficulties. Therefore, he moved into their neighbourhood, visited the families, invited the boys to spend weekends at a rented house in the peaceful surroundings of Biesenthal and tried to remain in contact with them until the circumstances of war made it impossible. Years after the war, one of these students would write: 'Our class, then, was fortunate to have such a man as its teacher. . . . He was so composed that it was easy for him to guide us; he made us familiar with the catechism in quite a new way, making it alive for us by telling us of many personal experiences'.

Not less important than the practical work of preaching and teaching was the effect Bonhoeffer's ecumenical activities had in broadening his concept of the Church and in preparing for his scathing denunciation of the Church's weakness in the face of Nazism. As Youth Secretary for the World Alliance of Churches, Bonhoeffer was able to travel to conferences in England, Czechoslovakia and Scandinavia. At the various conferences, he grappled with the salient issue of international brotherhood and peace in the world. He attacked not only nationalism but also the vague, pusillanimous placebos issued by the Churches on major issues affecting the relationship between nations and between the churches themselves. More and more he became the interpreter of the Church situation in Germany. Not only were the churches silent before the rising militarism in Nazi Germany and the hatred and mistrust existing among so-called Christian nations, but often enough they were willing to overlook patent abuses of basic human rights in order to avoid being suppressed should they protest too loudly. The Church, Bonhoeffer contended, must not just condemn wars in general. She must condemn *this war*.

### *The Church Struggle*

Bonhoeffer's difficulties with the Nazi regime date to the beginning of the Nazi takeover. On the very day after Hitler became chancellor, Dietrich gave a radio broadcast on the concept of true leadership. He spoke on the 'Führer principle' and warned against associating absolute obedience with the concept of leadership. It was dangerous, he said, to demand allegiance to the person as well as to the office since a Führer or leader could easily become a *Verführer* or an idol-like seducer. At this juncture he was cut off the air by the Gestapo in one of the Nazis' earliest suppressions of free speech. Bonhoeffer was, from that time on, listed as a known enemy of the Third Reich.

Bonhoeffer's opposition to Nazism stiffened when Hitler, helped by some enthusiastic churchmen themselves, attempted to integrate Nazi racism with the Gospel. This led to the schism which was to split the Protestant churches into several warring factions within Germany. Those who adopted National Socialism as part of their creed became known as German Christians; their church, the German Reich church. Hermann Grüner, a spokesman for the 'German Christians', focusing on the role of the National church, had stated: 'The time is

fulfilled for the German people in Hitler. It is because of Hitler that Christ, God the helper and redeemer, has become effective among us. Therefore National Socialism is positive Christianity in action'. Even more startling was his second statement: 'Hitler is the way of the Spirit and the will of God for the German people to enter the Church of Christ. With the courage of Lutherans, we German Christians strive now to build the Church with the ancient tested stones (Bible and Creed) and with the new stones (Race and People)'.

Led by Martin Niemoeller, Karl Barth and Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran-Evangelical Church made its first public protest in September of 1933 at the National Synod of Wittenberg. They called for freedom to preach and freedom for the preacher. With the backing of some two thousand ministers, those assembled formed the 'Confessing Church' in Germany. At the Free Synod of Barmen they also issued the famous 'Statement of Faith' to be known as 'The Barmen Declaration' in which Hitler's racist policies and interference with the Church were denounced. One important clause in the declaration made the signers marked men with the Gestapo: 'We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of our life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ, but to another Lord'. But too many pastors and their parishioners were cowed into silence or acquiescence by the terror tactics of the Nazis.

When the German Christians won controlling power over the Church after the infamous 'Brown Synod' of 1933, Bonhoeffer, in protest, took leave from his teaching duties at the university and went to London to serve as pastor of two German-speaking parishes. In England, Bonhoeffer attempted to serve the cause of the Confessing Church by informing his fellow ministers in the Anglican Church about the true nature of the German Reich church. At that time, few outside Germany had any idea of the struggle going on within the German Protestant churches. What is more, in the meetings of the World Alliance of Churches Bonhoeffer became known as a young radical for pestering the members to unseat the Reich church delegation and to declare them heretical. He was uncompromising on this point and also on his proposal that the churches advocate disarmament and pacifism.

#### *Director of an Illegal Seminary*

As Hitler's tyranny and his hatred of Christianity became more evident, Bonhoeffer had to face the personal decision of how best to resist. He was taken at this time with Mahatma Gandhi's theories of passive resistance and non-violent opposition to an unjust regime. Still wondering how to apply these novel ideas to Christianity and the coming struggle with Nazism, he made arrangements to visit Gandhi in India. In the meantime, however, representatives of the Confessing Church persuaded him to return to Germany instead to assume the dangerous mission of directing a secret seminary for young ministers willing to defy the Nazi ban on all ordinations within the Confessing

Church. This was a challenge as much in line with Bonhoeffer's skills as a teacher and spiritual director as with his zest for adventure. He organised the seminary first at Zingst and later at a rambling school-house in Finkenwalde near Stettin. In a Germany geared for war, Bonhoeffer's seminary was described as an oasis of peace and spiritual freedom. The community's life together included daily prayers, personal confession, and Bonhoeffer's own lectures and discussions on preaching and the spiritual life. He had to defend his manner of directing the seminary against critics who were quick to see in the 'common life' lived there and in the 'House of Brethren' the inroads of 'Catholicising' tendencies in Bonhoeffer's outlook. Hence, he wrote: 'There are two things the brethren have to learn during their short time in the seminary—first, how to lead a communal life in daily and strict obedience to the will of Christ Jesus, in the exercise of the humblest and highest service one Christian brother can perform for another; they must learn to recognise the strength and liberation to be found in brotherly service and communal life in a Christian community'. The young ministers themselves found the period of meditation especially difficult. Yet, on this point too, Bonhoeffer was insistent. Even at the height of the war years he stressed again the prime importance of daily meditation for the brethren, many of whom were then serving on the front: 'The daily, silent meditation upon the Word of God with which I am concerned—even if it is only for a few minutes—must be for me the crystallisation of everything that brings order into my life, both inwardly and outwardly. In these days when our old rules of life have had to be discarded, and there is great danger of finding our inner order endangered by the rush of events, and by the all-absorbing demands of work and service, meditation gives our life a kind of stability, preserving us in the saving way of communion and community, with our brothers, with our spiritual home'.

The Gestapo finally discovered the seminary and closed it in 1937. Bonhoeffer tried to keep the training of ministers going by shifting locations, but this proved too difficult to accomplish since the Nazis began to conscript the young ministers. The Confessing Church, too, was beginning to waver in its refusal to compromise with the regime. Hitler had, in fact, made some concessions to the church leaders and toned down the propaganda in an effort to woo the churches over prior to unleashing his armies against Europe. Patriotism and peace were the bait.

### *The 'Costly Grace' of Discipleship*

The spirit of Finkenwalde was, however, to reach the outside world through two of Bonhoeffer's books. *Life together* describes the experience of brotherhood at the seminary and how he and his seminarians had been brought together by their vocation in Christ and by the common life they led. Their life of prayer, silent meditation on the scriptures, hymn singing, study and mutual service were

to be the brotherly support needed for their mission to the world. This might even include martyrdom. *The Cost of Discipleship*, which began out of his lectures to the seminarians and his private reflections on the Gospel, is an uncompromising call to a courageous faith in the midst of the Nazi crisis. It was also a challenge rooted in Bonhoeffer's own personal experience of faith based on living out the Sermon on the Mount. He had written of this in a letter to his brother, Karl Friedrich: 'I now believe . . . I am at last on the right track—for the first time in my life. And that often makes me very glad. . . . I believe I know that inwardly I shall be really clear and honest with myself only when I have begun to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount. . . . There are things for which an uncompromising stand is worthwhile. And it seems to me that peace and social justice, or Christ himself, are such things'.

In this book Bonhoeffer indicted Christians for pursuing 'cheap grace' or a reduction of Christianity in which grace became a principle or system, faith became merely intellectual assent and the Christian life itself a somnolent gliding along with the world's standards. Christians lured into a seeming bargain of forgiveness without sincere repentance, and baptism without discipline, led a life hardly distinguished in its mediocrity from the rest of the world. This was 'cheap grace' without discipleship, without Jesus Christ and his cross. In one of his most chilling observations, he complained that many of his fellow churchmen 'have gathered like ravens around the carcass of cheap grace and there have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ'. Christians, on the contrary, are summoned to an active, self-sacrificing service, to a life of 'costly grace'. In this sense, a disciple must be unusual, a lover of Christ and his cross and a light to the world because through him alone Christ becomes visible to every generation. At any moment, a disciple must be ready to die for his faith after the manner of Jesus. This is 'costly grace' because it may cost a follower of Christ his life. 'When Christ calls a man', Bonhoeffer wrote, 'he bids him come and die'.

#### *Work in the German Resistance*

Soon Bonhoeffer would take the first of the final decisions which would lead him to his own death for Christ. Early in the summer of 1939, he accepted the invitation of Reinhold Niebuhr, to conduct a lecture tour in America. It was also planned that he remain in the States to serve as pastor for German refugees in New York. The reason for this was Bonhoeffer's avowed intention to refuse military service and the knowledge that this would lead to possible imprisonment and perhaps a stronger repression of the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer decided to go to New York, therefore, to avoid this dilemma. He stayed less than a month. War was about to break out, and he was tormented by the thought of his own isolation from his people when so much needed to be done to help Christianity combat Nazism.

He returned to Germany after having written a very moving letter to his patron Niebuhr. In this letter, which became a kind of farewell note to his American brethren, he confessed: 'I have had the time to think and to pray about my situation and that of my nation and to have God's will for me clarified. I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people'.

On his return Bonhoeffer initially had no legitimate base of operation. In 1940 he was forbidden to preach and told to report regularly to the police. The following year his books were proscribed, and he was forbidden to write or publish. Convinced now that his former pacifism was hopelessly inadequate against the 'great masquerade of evil', he decided to join the anti-Nazi underground. Its centre was the *Abwehr*, or German military intelligence organisation. He had connections there through his brother Klaus and his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi (both later executed by the Gestapo), who were eager to recruit him for their 'espionage operations'. Bonhoeffer's ostensible job was to gather intelligence material through his ecumenical contacts. Under cover of this intelligence work and because, in the beginning of the war, the *Abwehr* was relatively free from Gestapo surveillance, he was able to continue his writings in secret and to travel outside Germany on behalf of the resistance. His principal mission was to seek terms of surrender from the allies if the plot against Hitler succeeded. Eventually, however, the Gestapo's jealousies and suspicions of the *Abwehr* led to the arrest of all the key figures, including the leaders, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and General Hans Oster, and Bonhoeffer himself. At first, the Gestapo had only vague charges against them; the full truth emerged only after the failure of the assassination attempt against Hitler of July 20, 1944.

### *The Prison Letters*

It was from Tegel prison in Berlin that Bonhoeffer's most poignant statements about Christianity were written. In these letters he argued that many of the Church's traditional approaches to problems were like 'rusty swords' powerless against evils like Nazism. In the last year of his life he proceeded to engage in a radical reappraisal of all religious structures and theological language and their relationship to the deeper meaning of Christianity. 'What is bothering me incessantly', he wrote in the letter of April 30, 1944, 'is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today'.

In trying to answer that question, Bonhoeffer criticised not simply the traditional images of God but especially the weak attitude of a church so pietistically wrapped up in the world beyond that she had compromised her integrity and relevance. The Church, encrusted with the paraphernalia of religiosity, had rendered herself ineffective

against the world crisis created by Hitler. The preached Word issuing from such a Church had become incredible to modern man. Hence Bonhoeffer demanded a thoroughgoing reassessment of what really constitutes the Church and how this Church can effectively mediate God's presence in Christ to a 'world come of age', characterised as 'non-religious'.

Bonhoeffer's prototype for restructuring the Church is, like his entire ecclesiology, basically Christocentric. His concern that the Church answer the challenge of the mature world translates itself into a vision of Christianity in which Christ's presence in the Church can once again be effectively mediated to mankind. This aim he enunciated in his letter of June 30, 1944. 'Let me briefly summarise what I am concerned about: How is the world come of age claimed by Jesus Christ?' Bonhoeffer never doubted the Lordship of Christ over the world; at issue was the proper, contemporaneous understanding of this Lordship after which the Church could pattern herself. When the Church could discover this form and live as Christ in the world, then and only then could Christ reach out through the Church to modern man and woman.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ is, then, determinative of any Church restructuring. And the figure of Christ which returns almost hauntingly in the letters is that of the suffering and crucified Lord who reveals the power and wisdom of God by his very weakness, the representative of God and man whose life was lived for others. In his 'Outline for a Book' Bonhoeffer identifies the genuine encounter with Jesus Christ as an experience of transcendence, or 'the experience that a transformation of all human life is given in the fact that "Jesus is there only for others"'. The Church, which is Christ existing as community, should refract to the entire world this Christic attitude toward others. All of Bonhoeffer's arguments for the visibility, concreteness and relevance of the Church as the revelation of Christ converge in the Church's vocation to be Christ to the world.

This explains his keen disappointment with the Confessing Church when he observed in it the same defects which had corrupted the German Reich church. The Confessing Church, he claimed, had also forgotten that her vocation to mediate God's love demanded an active will to live as Christ and not to engage in a frantic effort to insure her survival. In prison, Bonhoeffer perceived more clearly that Christ had always broken out of systems and institutions that wanted to hem him in. But he also saw with sadness that the Church, instead of being the *alter Christus* to the world, had cowered behind her own structures afraid to take risks which might upset the political status quo and bring on her own suppression. Hence, in the same letter which sketched out his proposals for the future-looking Church, Bonhoeffer stipulated that 'the Church must come out of her stagnation. We must move out again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying controversial things, if we are to get down to the serious problems of life'.



If the whole reason for the Church's existence is to be Christ to the world, then there is considerable justification to Bonhoeffer's complaint that the Church's being taken up with her self-defence had hindered personal faith in Christ. A Church afraid to face danger was, in his opinion, a poor imitation of Christ. If Christ is 'the man for others', then 'the Church is the Church only when she exists for others'. What Bonhoeffer has said of the secular existence of the Church and of a 'non-religious' Christianity can be summed up in this expression. The Church in the new era he saw dawning for Christianity would be a servant Church defined by her Christic other-centredness. He asks that the Christian community give radical proof of its conformation to Christ in the modern world by divesting itself of its wealth and traditional privileges. 'To make a start', he suggested, 'it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The Church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others'. The future of the Church, he held, depended on whether she had the courage to participate in the full life of Christ in the world. The revelation of Christ reaches man not only through the Church's explicit proclamation but also by the force of example whereby the person of Christ encounters people through the community of believers. For this force to be reactivated, Bonhoeffer envisaged a totally new form of the Church that would shed forever the trappings so often mistaken for divine revelation and authentic faith. Bonhoeffer wished very simply to peel away the layers of inauthenticity which had masked true Christian faith. The question for him is neither, 'What *must* I believe?' nor even 'What *can* I believe?' but 'What do we really believe? I mean, believe in such a way that we stake our lives on it?'

### *Martyrdom*

In October 1944, Bonhoeffer was suddenly transferred to the Gestapo's maximum security prison. On February 7, he and nineteen other 'distinguished' prisoners were taken to Buchenwald. Among the prisoners was the British Intelligence Officer, Captain Payne Best, who in his book, *The Venlo Incident*, noted: 'Bonhoeffer was all humility; he always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive. He was one of the very few men that I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him'.

Bonhoeffer and Best were among those prisoners who on April 3 were herded into a prison van and brought southward to the extermination camp at Flossenbürg. By April 8, they had reached the small Bavarian village of Schönberg and there disembarked at the schoolhouse, then being used as a temporary jail. Since it was Low Sunday, several of the prisoners prevailed on Bonhoeffer to conduct

a meditation service on the Bible verses for the day. First he offered Isaiah's words: 'With his wounds we are healed'; then he gave the opening portion of the First Epistle of Peter: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'. Captain Best recalled: 'He reached the hearts of all finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment, and the thoughts and resolutions which it had brought'. At the end of the little service, the door was flung open and 'two evil-looking men in civilian clothes' came in. They called out Bonhoeffer's name and asked him to follow them. For the prisoners this had come to mean only one thing, a verdict of condemnation and execution. Bonhoeffer bade everyone farewell and, drawing Captain Best aside, gave him a final message to his English friend, Bishop Bell of Chichester. 'This is the end but for me also the beginning of life'. These were his last recorded words. The only account of his death has been given by the prison doctor who wrote that, after the verdicts had been read out to Bonhoeffer and those to be hanged with him, he saw 'Pastor Bonhoeffer, still in his prison clothes, kneeling in fervent prayer to the Lord his God. The devotion and evident conviction of being heard that I saw in the prayer of this intensely captivating man moved me to the depths'. He added: 'At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. . . . In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God'.

The commemorative tablet erected in the Church at Flossenbug, the village where Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Gestapo, reads very simply: 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Witness to Jesus Christ among his Brothers'. To be a witness to Jesus Christ is the principle challenge which the life and death of Bonhoeffer address to all who call themselves disciples of Christ.